

## EIGHTEENTH AND NINETEENTH CENTURY NEIGHBORHOODS OF WILMINGTON

Wilmington began as a very small community, on a neck of land between the Brandywine and the Christina rivers (Figure 3). This neck of land, with a ridge to the west of town and marshes to the east, was well drained and contained excellent, rock-free farmland. The town was founded as Willing Town in the early 1730s by Thomas Willing, who obtained land along the north bank of the Christian River from his father-in-law Andrew Justison. The name was later changed to Wilmington, after the Duke of Wilmington. With several other investors, Willing laid out lots on this property. The resulting lots, houses, and businesses formed a T-shaped cluster near the foot of Market street, along Front and Second streets. The major part of Willing Town's business was wheat export. The city had access to the rich wheat fields of the Susquehanna Valley to the west, and exported wheat from the flour mills along the Brandywine River. These mills were some of the first in the country. The owners of these mills were the city's most important citizens, and contributed much to the town's growth and prosperity.

In 1739, only 600 people lived in Wilmington. By 1770 and 1780, the town's population grew to 1,500. The city had a mixed character, with rich and poor, businesses and homes next to each other, and often on the same property. There was a tendency, however, for different classes of people to live in different parts of town. The more well-to-do built their homes along Market Street. People of some wealth also lived on the block bounded by Orange and Tatnall Street, south of Second Street. Less prominent citizens, mostly craftsmen, lived on the other blocks in the area. Poorer people lived on the edges of town.

The more well-to-do families lived at the center of town, so they could be close to the town's government, their banks and the exporting business that they either owned or had financial interests in. These people were surrounded by craftsmen and artisans, whose products were bought by the upper classes of the

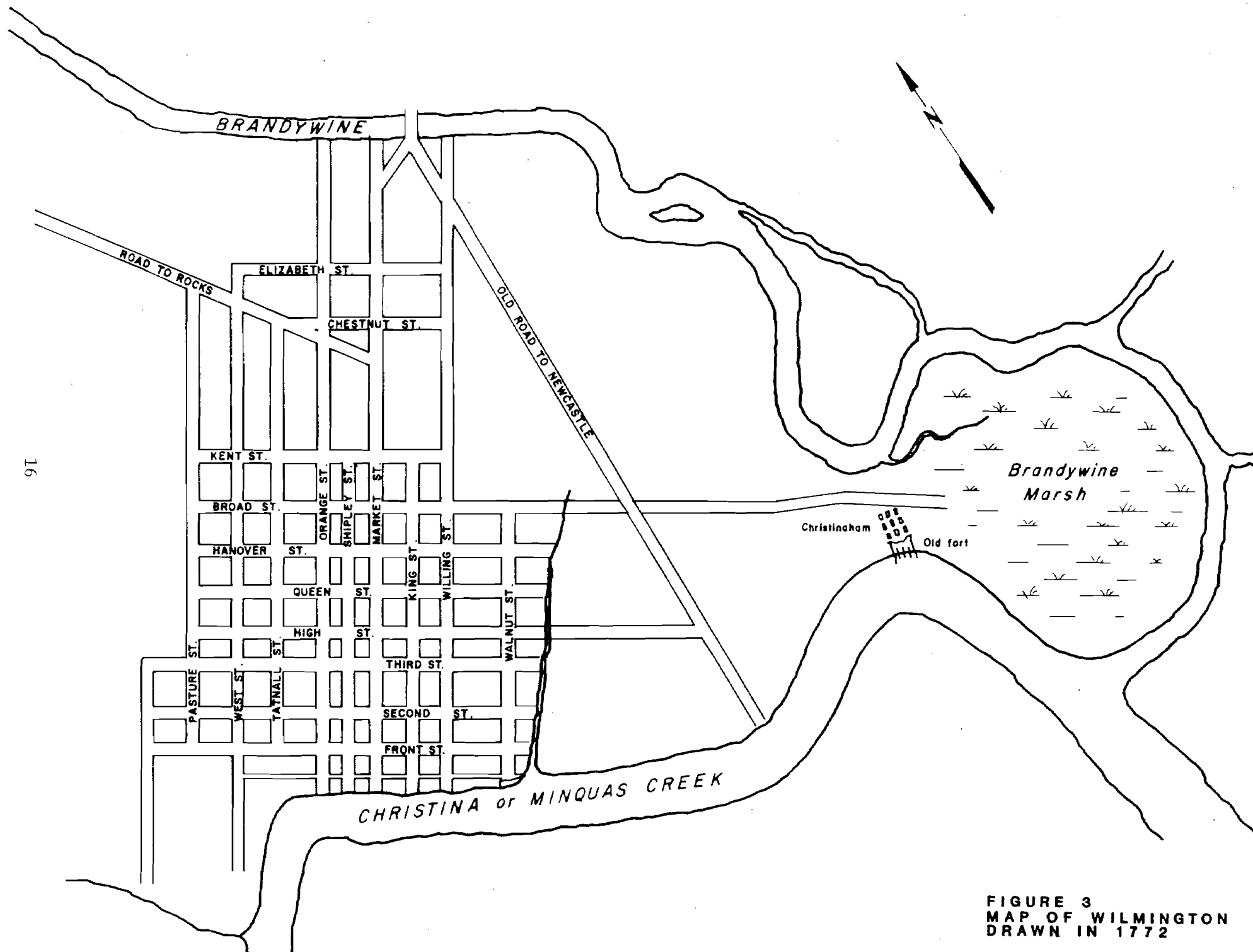


FIGURE 3  
MAP OF WILMINGTON  
DRAWN IN 1772

city. In general, Wilmington was a very compact community, with homes and businesses all within walking distance.

By the 1810s, however, things began to change. Shops and other businesses began to grow and expand in the city's center. The wealthy individuals who lived along lower Market Street moved to the northern end of the street. Their properties were reoccupied by shops, which were owned by peoples of lesser means. Also at this time, more workers and laborers moved into this area along Second and Front Street. Many black families now lived on the blocks at the west end of the town, such as along West Street south of Second Street. Why did the wealthier occupants of this area move? Possibly, they did not want to live in an area that was becoming more and more commercial, and they had enough money to move out and relocate.

This section of Wilmington, between King and Justison Streets, south of Second, remained the same for most of the nineteenth century. However, other parts of the city did change. With the appearance of the railroads in Wilmington, the city became more industrial. Factories building materials for the railroad sprang up all over the city, but especially along the Christina River. Also, factories in the city became more mechanized due to new innovations in machinery, such as steam power, which replaced earlier water and human power. Many of these factories could be found near the Brandywine, which since the earliest days of the city, was the location of factories and mills. At this time, around the 1840s, new neighborhoods appeared south of the Brandywine; neighborhoods of skilled workmen and laborers. These neighborhoods contained only these classes of people. What was happening was that skilled workers and laborers lived near their place of work. When these new industries appeared, they came to live near them.

In summary, the study area began as a mixed business and residential area, with mostly well-to-do households on Market Street surrounded by craftsmen and artisans, such as cabinetmakers. By 1810, these more wealthy families moved out, and shops owned by people of lesser means moved in. This mixture of businesses and what we would call "middle class" families lived in the study area until the 1880s and 1890s, when most of properties in the area had become businesses mixed in with residences of workers and laborers ("blue collar").

To get a good cross-section of Wilmington's people and their "artifacts", the archaeologists asked the historians to find properties in the study area that were occupied by the different types of households on Market Street, and locate the property of a well-to-do family that lived there around 1800, just before these people and their equally wealthy neighbors moved from lower Market Street. This property was selected by the archaeologists for excavation. The historians also located properties occupied by working class households during the 1850s along West Street and portions of Front Street. This was a second area for the archaeologists to study. The historians learned that other types of households occupied these properties before the 1850s. From the 1810s to 1840s, black families lived on West Street, just north of the corner of West and Front Streets. Unfortunately, the archaeologists did not find artifacts linked to these families when the area was excavated.

The historians found that the block bounded by Orange and Tatnall Streets, south of Second, was first occupied by wealthy families, possibly until the 1820s, and then different businesses and "middle class" households moved in. The archaeologists felt that by excavating this area, artifacts from both wealthy and middle class families would be found.

With this information from the historians, the archaeologists knew which particular properties they want to dig in, providing them with a "slice of Wilmington's past for study.